



Quarter century of our collective humanity

COMMUNITY-ORGANIZING-HOS-
PITALITY-JUSTICE-SOBER-ARI-
TY-AND-VIOLENCE-PERSONALISM

SISTERS OF THE ROAD
1979–2004



Quarter Century of Our Collective Humanity: Sisters Of The Road, 1979–2004

We have been working on this book project since summer. Mary Kay collected materials from customers and volunteers, while Mary Kay, Mark and Bert interviewed Genny.

This book was produced with QuarkXPress 4.03, and typeset in Arial, **BERMUDA IS SQUIGGLE**, Chaparral Display, Georgia, Palatino and Skia type-faces.

Throughout this book, this sidebar provides bits and pieces of interesting information.

And yes, I eat at Sisters Of The Road, too. I just realized while making this book that our cornbread isn't vegan.

25th Anniversary Events Committee
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Some materials in this book are reprinted from *DINING WITH DIGNITY: A MANUAL FOR NON-PROFIT CAFÉS* (Portland, Oregon: Sisters Of The Road Café, 1994).

Our special thanks to:

- Genny Nelson for sharing extensively her experiences, knowledge and memories for the production of this book.
- **And most importantly**, every customer, staff member, volunteer, board member and donor during the past 25 years—**You** are the reason for the success of Sisters Of The Road! Yes, this means you (your name here:_____).

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pened all the time.

We really got to go back and claim our roots when we launched crossroads in March 2002. We were actively articulating and practicing: *don't do for anyone what they can do for themselves*. A homeless person is their own best advocate. And I think that as we implement the current five-year plan we're in, and the café transforms itself into both a restaurant and a community organizing center, that that credo will be more true than ever.

[This interview was approximately two hours in length. It has been edited for brevity and readability.—Sarah.]



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"In here there are no strangers..."

Sisters Of The Road

...just friends we've never met."

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at the corner of sixth avenue and davis street in the historic old town/chinatown neighborhood north of burnside street
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Thank you everyone for reading my little notes on the margins.

I know all these fonts are quite small, but I tried to put as much content as possible so this book would be an enjoyable and informative reading for you.

Finally, I thank Bert, Mark and Monica for giving me this opportunity to put this book together.

See you at Sisters soon. Don't overeat cornbreads...

—Sarah.

the word he would choose, but he was definitely intrigued with the idea of homeless people impacting policy on their issues. Ultimately, we were invited to apply for funds from the Bureau of Housing and Community Development. We put a proposal together and it was accepted. We got initial money in the summer of 2001, and by October of that same year, we were launching our community organizing project.

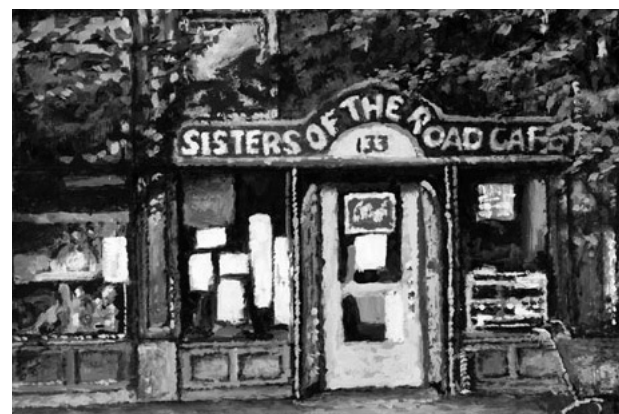
The project had two components: research, and a people's organization. We interviewed 600 men and women who had been or currently were homeless. Each interview was roughly two-and-a-half hours long, and began with a field researcher asking the narrator to talk about their unique experience of homelessness. The research from these one-to-one interviews will result in a manual, explaining how other municipalities can replicate this project; an anthology of people's own words and pictures; and analysis of the data.

The other component was community organizing and the building of a people's organization called crossroads. We went back to original Sisters bedrock. As a small organization learning how to run a restaurant, sometimes the community organizing had to take more of a back burner, but it never was off the stove. We always understood that we are not a social service agency. I don't believe for a minute that Sisters' legacy is feeding thousands and thousands of people a decent meal. But sometimes people don't understand that, so we have had to talk about community organizing, and those conversations hap-

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Painting by Victor Guschov

*'The thing to do
is to start.'*
—Peter Maurin.

Sisters Of The Road Café (note the capitalization) was founded on Wednesday, Nov. 7, 1979. It is located at 133 N.W. Sixth Ave. in Portland's Old Town/Chinatown Neighborhood.

Sisters Of The Road is the name that women transients called themselves. The symbol of three x's in a circle is the hobo symbol for good food and hospitality. Our name and logo hence celebrate the strengths and wisdom of an exceptional set of women. (Source: DINING WITH DIGNITY.)

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Cornbread recipe

5 c. (1.2L) yellow corn meal 5 c. (1.3L) white flour
 1.5 quarts (1.4L) milk (or 2 2/3 cups powdered milk)
 6 eggs 1.5 c. (350mL) sugar 6 tbs. Oil
 1 tbs. Salt 1 tbs. Baking powder

Sisters Of The Road's legendary cornbread recipe originated from a Society of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary (SNJM) nun in Marylhurst, Oregon.

Cornbread is a variety of quick bread (a bread leavened chemically, rather than by yeast) containing cornmeal. It has been a traditional staple of rural cuisine in the southern United States of America, especially as part of the Soul food (food traditionally eaten by African-Americans, whose cooking method originated during the time of slavery).

Mix ingredients thoroughly. Beat eggs until foamy. Add milk and oil to eggs. Combine wet and dry ingredients quickly and stir only until dry ingredients are dampened. Bake 30 minutes at 425°F (218°C).

Chapter One:

Our ingredients

—What we are made of

As we celebrate 25 years of growth, change, learning and acceptance, it is helpful to look back at the reasons why the Sisters Of The Road Café first opened:

1. To be a safe public place for everyone, especially women and children;
2. To offer nourishing meals at little cost or in exchange for labor; and
3. To offer job training and employment experience for local residents.

The cornbread recipe shown above has been with Sisters since the beginning; no matter how many

problem.

Sharing power with our customers is the other reason Sisters has survived. When a customer who thought we were closing for lack of funding offered to bring in her social security check, we understood intimately the personal sacrifice our customers were willing to make to insure Sisters' viability.

Bert: Why don't you just talk for a second about crossroads, how the need for crossroads was identified, and how it's changed Sisters. Maybe that's the way to wrap it up.

Genny: OK. Well, from the beginning of Sisters I would always say to anybody who would listen, that we're not going to end homelessness until the people who have that experience are at the table to shape policy and solutions. That's different from the charity model. And, as you can well imagine, that's a pretty foreign concept to most people. But, we kept talking about it, and various opportunities came our way: I was asked to teach a class to HUD managers on community organizing as a paradigm to end homelessness; we had national and international visitors to the café; we wrote about it in articles for publication; and we addressed local, state and federal representatives. It was a part of every conversation on ending homelessness that Sisters has ever had.

It's one of those conversations in the winter of 2001 that led us to a request for a preliminary proposal from Portland City Commissioner Erik Sten. Commissioner Sten was delighted, that might not be

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At Sisters Of The Road Café, you can get a cup of coffee for 25 cents.

In this age it is hard to imagine this. As recently as 1996, I remember that Nordstrom used to offer the famous "bottomless" coffee at its café for 25 cents still.

Today we pay about \$1.40 for the same thing elsewhere.

I wanted to put in the tamale pie recipe, but I ran out of space. Write to Sisters if you want the recipe.

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When I first came to Sisters, it was because a few days in prior, a friend of mine met me in the afternoon and she smelled like good food.

I felt compelled to check this place out.

status. We knew we didn't want to be a social service agency and assume a board structure. But, we knew we needed to incorporate in the state of Oregon, which we did immediately. We knew we needed to pursue a 501(c)(3) status, and in the context of filing for 501(c)(3), we would need to put together by-laws and assign at least three people as officers to incorporate in the state of Oregon. I think it took a year. We were a co-op, with a collective of managers, the first five years. In the mid 80s, we adopted a more traditional Board of Directors structure.

Bert: What is the reason Sisters has survived?

Genny: Sisters makes sense to our customers. In the early days, both customers and staff were dealing with limited incomes. You could not look at paid staff at Sisters then and think any of us were pulling down a great salary. Our customers knew that I was getting food stamps, and they knew I had a day-care stipend from Welfare for my daughter. Our stories were similar. We would compare experiences standing in line at the grocery store with food stamps while everybody else stared at you. That shared humiliation and struggle to survive bonded us. Because of that mutual bonding, we stood up for each other, and Sisters survived with a truly radical understanding of poverty.

People who are entrenched in a social service model never think you can create systemic change; that the problem is too big, there are too many people homeless. Sisters, on the other hand, studied homelessness differently, by always going to the root of the

times it has been changed, creatively modified and mutated, it always gets back to this recipe.

Often the cooks are told by the customers that the cornbread is off.

This is a good example of how Sisters Of The Road operates: by responding to the customers.

This book takes input from staff, volunteers and most importantly customers, and was created to honor the work of all of these people.

Our philosophy:

Nonviolence

and Gentle Personalism

- Honesty and non-humiliation
- Non-judgmental
- Being given a chance to change our behavior
- A safe place for everyone
- All individuals have worth
- We must actively protect each other's freedoms
- No one has a monopoly on the truth
- We are all willing to help each other
- The humanity of our customers and treating them specially.

Among a set of core values that runs through all aspects of an organization, the concept of nonviolence will be familiar to many. However, it is rare to find it practiced the way that Sisters Of The Road does: *by using gentle personalism*. This puts dignity

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If it wasn't for Sisters Of The Road:

- "My real son wouldn't have found me."—D.M.
- "There would be a Starbucks here."—Unknown.
- "I could not be who I am."—A.

Because of Sisters Of The Road:

- "I feel like part of a family!"—S.
- "That I'm no better or worse than anyone else."—F.P.

Personalism as advocated by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin combined the best of Christian faith and practice with the socio-economic justice and liberation movements of their time. Some refer to personalism as a libertarian socialism with Christian spirit.



Genevieve (Genny) Nelson and Sandy Gooch founded Sisters Of The Road.

Sisters Of The Road Café is a non-profit restaurant open to the general public. Everyone is welcome.

You can enjoy a full, satisfying lunch for only \$1.25.

above all else, and valuing people for who they are, no questions asked. It can be a challenging process—a process that asks its practitioners to put stereotypes and biases aside in a very real way.

“By the time I helped start Sisters in 1979, I had since 1972 been formally introduced to **nonviolence**, not only as a philosophy but **as a way of life**. It was very challenging the first couple of years because there was no other organization on the street that offered their services from a philosophy of nonviolence and gentle personalism and when people walked through the door at Sisters, they knew something different was going on. But unlike today, almost 25 years later, they didn’t know what it was.”

—Genny Nelson, Co-founder.

•
“The one thing that inspired me to donate to this program was the fact that you **helped people to have dignity**. No one needs to be belittled when they are desperate. I liked the fact that people were encouraged to work for their meals.”—Elizabeth Lackey.

•
“Sisters has always been equated, for me, to unconditional support and respect of one’s dignity. So often, organizations think of themselves as ‘the doer.’ I’d rather think of Sisters as **‘the instrument’**—for all of us

Genny: Yeah.

Bert: And then how did it evolve from there in the first few months?

Genny: In November 1979, it was initially Sandy and I. We agreed to try to pay ourselves \$650 a month. We arrived at this figure based on our CETA wage with Boxcar Bertha’s and the understanding between us that we couldn’t make ends meet with any less by ourselves. Both of us had young children that we were raising. Five or six months later, Allen Rothstein and Sandy Hill began a morning program and received a percentage of the total take.

Bert: Percentage of the total take? Wow.

Genny: Right. Because Sandy and I weren’t going to be able to do an early morning program, but if they felt like it could make a go, we were going to give them an opportunity.

Our first nine months, we ran the Meals on Heels program for St. Vincent de Paul on the weekend in order to have our rent at no cost during the week. Sandy and Allen got Meals on Heels money, Allen received an hourly wage based on \$4.10 an hour, which would have been the standard.

Bert: Do you remember about how many customers you got the first day or the first week that you were open?

Genny: We could only seat 22 people. We were not open five days a week in the beginning months of Sisters.

Bert: When did we become a non-profit and when was a board formed?

Genny: We filed immediately for non-profit



TriMet’s Fareless Square was introduced in 1975 as part of the wider regional plan for improving air quality. The transit mall on Fifth and Sixth avenues opened in 1977. Originally provided free transit service with-in downtown, Fareless Square was expanded in 2001 to include Rose Quarter and the Lloyd District.

All buses to Union Station take you to the bus stop right in front of the café.

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Sisters Of The Road is located in the historic Old Town/Chinatown (OTCT) neighborhood. OTCT consists of the portion of downtown Portland north of West Burnside Street and east of Northwest Broadway, as well as the Ankeny-Skidmore blocks south of Burnside.

The other side of Broadway is the trendy and developing Pearl District.

Most of the newly-developing area of the Pearl was once a railroad yard. Today it is home to art galleries, retailers and upscale housing development.

Bert: Let's ask a lighter question. Tell us your favorite story about food at Sisters.

Genny: Well, first you have to understand that I may have brought the philosophy but it didn't mean that I wasn't supposed to learn the restaurant trade, and that Sandy brought the restaurant trade but also needed to embrace the philosophy and practice it. But, I'm no great cook. We had recipes and I'd follow those and most of the time they'd turn out. In the first couple of years, we offered what we called "chili over rice," small and large bowls of it. You could get a sprinkling of orange USDA cheese on top. In January 1980, two months after opening, our customers were really encouraging me to make "learning how to cook" my New Year's resolution, so I took that to heart.

I remember another story. We had a guy come in the café early on, he was a chef, and he wrote [reviews] about restaurants. That day, we had a left-over salad that had Italian dressing in it, and we put that into the soup. I thought it tasted pretty good but, if you're not a cook you tolerate a whole lot. We thought we were so clever, being creative with what was on hand and not wasting anything. So, this guy was sitting at the table and he ordered the soup—when I was coming by bussing a place next to him, he said, "You have salad in this soup, huh?" I told him the truth, and he didn't give us a bad review.

Bert: He was able to figure out what was in it. Let me ask a question about staff, because I realized I never asked this before. Did it start out with just you and Sandy as staff members?

in the community. Your lack of ego in this atmosphere allows all of us supporting each other to do so 'eyeball to eyeball.' To ask one to profess this or that ideology to get your 'handout' is demeaning and outlandishly disrespectful."—an anonymous customer.



Our eternal favorite, "Rice, beans and cornbread" has been offered almost every day since the café opened.

Originally it was called "chili over rice," until Utah Phillips questioned our etymology in the winter of 1980. It's been "rice and beans" ever since.

Our purpose:

Building relationships

- Nurturing and healing relationships
- Reciprocal gifts and relationships with customers
- Community and home
- Integrity and honesty
- A way out of isolation
- Conflict resolution
- Accountability to one another

Nobody who has a relationship with the Sisters Of The Road—be it a customer, volunteer, donor, a member of the staff—is unchanged. Sometimes the change is obvious, sometimes it's subtle. But people walk away from Sisters different.

"The green room has become my secret garden. It is in this room that I get to make connections with real people. There is no talk of the weather or sporting events. There is much talk about human reactions to the reality of life on this planet. There is talk of homelessness and despair, or joy and discovery, of spirituality, health and attitude, and how homelessness affects everything in a person's life. I suspect



the people who tell me their stories are changed in some way by the telling. I know I am changed by the listening.”—Marla Koch.

Dorothy Day, one of the originators of the Catholic Worker Movement (CWM), emphasized hospitality.

Day was born on Nov. 8, 1897. Once a journalist with close ties to the radical movements of the 1930s, she became a Roman Catholic, met Peter Maurin, and started the *Catholic Worker* newspaper in 1933. She passed away on Nov. 29, 1980.

For a selection of articles about personalism, nonviolence and CWM philosophy, see www.cjd.org/paper/roots/roots.html

Hospitality

- A customer is anyone who comes through our door, they do not need to purchase anything; and they may bring their own food into the café.

- Be a welcoming home and a serene environment.
- Public restrooms are available.
- Providing customer mail: receiving, mailing address and message service.
- Serving a good meal: excellence in nutrition and health code.

The meal is only part of the story. Another equally important part is the welcome that everybody gets when they walk through the door. Above that door rests a sign that says, “In here there are no strangers—just friends we’ve never met.” Another customer writes, “My first time I was brought to Sisters Of The Road, a friend brought me. She said she had an account on the books because of her job washing the aprons. So she could

‘Using gentle personalism puts dignity above all else, and valuing people for who they are.’

“It’s not the Ritz, but it’s a good, hot meal!”
—a customer comment.

criticism, and how that came to be and where that came from? It’s one of the most valuable things I’ve learned at Sisters.

Genny: You know, that expression “criticism/self-criticism” came from Mao Zedong out of the Chinese revolution. It’s interesting when I think back on it. The first winter of the café, 1980, I began to do my own self-study on the Chinese revolution. I was reading Agnes Smedley, Edgar Snow, Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. Now, many years later, I can tell you that some of that study wove itself into Sisters. Not the violence of an armed revolution, but some of the discipline that all revolutionaries are asked to stand by, whether it’s a violent or a nonviolent conflict. That’s where criticism/self-criticism comes in, I think the language I use more now is “check and balance.”

Our daily experience in Sisters is: Can you take what our customers and your co-workers are saying to you, the criticism, and not personalize it? Especially in our society, where even using the word criticism puts people on edge. But we did use those words and we honed them to an understanding that I think that Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and others in the Chinese revolution were trying to teach: you hold yourself accountable. If you do that, then you’ll be able to take in criticism. Now have I made a million mistakes and more around all of that? Of course! So we train constantly. This is a platform that doesn’t punish you, but instead asks you to take personal responsibility for your actions. At Sisters, it is a criticism/self-criticism from the heart and soul.



Chili originated in Texas around the 1840s. Today it is the official state dish of Texas.

A basic chili consists of tomatoes, onions, beans and chile peppers (hence the name), as well as ground meat such as pork or beef. Vegetarian chili is made usually with textured vegetable protein (TVP), seitan (wheat gluten) or tempeh.

“Boxcar Bertha’s” here should not be confused with the coffee shop of the same name, which Sisters operated between 1999 and 2001 as a community wealth building initiative.



In the 1979, Sisters ran a "Meals on Heels" program for St. Vincent de Paul, in exchange for rent. They walked to deliver meals rather than drove.

At Sisters Of The Road Café, there is a messaging board where anyone can leave a message for others.

I would like to take this time to thank all the hard-working employees and volunteers of Sisters!

is, action and reflection. The self-reflection is so critical because you have to sit down and do that check and balance that begs answers to difficult questions: did I use my privilege unfairly in the café? Is the café culturally relevant to our customers? Did I call a situation wrong and go back and apologize? Human behaviour hasn't changed in all of these years, we have to really make the time to do the reflection because it's very easy to just do the work.

Bert: So the philosophy of nonviolence and gentle personalism was put in place in the café early on. In a little bit of contrast to that, approximately 10 years ago, the Board of Directors wasn't in the same place. The Board wasn't all about nonviolence and gentle personalism and having respect for each other and that was a huge change for the Board. We started doing things differently. We had people leave because that didn't seem to be right for them but it made the Board better. It really did.

Genny: And that group that you were a part of were the pioneers in terms of insuring that we'd always be there from there on out. That part of the criteria for board membership would match the staff requirement, which is a commitment to the practice of nonviolence and gentle personalism.

Bert: We worked really hard to institutionalize a lot of those things and I think it seems to have stuck and that's good to hear. But our committee meetings even now are run differently than they were. People check in. And it's all the Sisters' thing and we definitely appreciate it. To change the subject a little bit, can you talk a little bit about the criticism/self-

buy me lunch. I thought, 'this is different, I was hungry, lonely, homeless, and curious.' It's been four months since my first meal, and now I come into Sisters almost daily. As I walk through the doors, [I find] happiness, friendliness, acceptance, sincerity and nutrition."



crossroads (note the name is in lower-case and bolded) **people's organization** is located just around the corner at 618 N.W. Davis St. Its weekly action planning meetings take place on Wednesdays at 6:30 p.m., to conceive, implement and evaluate tactics. These meetings are attended by housed and homeless citizens of Portland.

Community organizing for systemic change

- A commitment to social justice
- Being a socially just employer
- Everyone's input is important
- Don't do for anyone what they can do for themselves
- Our best advocate is ourselves
- Customer driven solutions

Sisters Of The Road started in 1979 as a 22-seat café. Over the years it has grown both in size and scope. It now seats 51; accepts food stamps; sells meal coupons as an alternative to panhandling; published

'In here there are no strangers; just friends we've never met.'

DINING WITH DIGNITY, a manual about establishing a café based on the Sisters' model; conducted 600 interviews of community members with experience of homelessness; and initiated crossroads, a people's organization (www.crossroadspdx.org).

The Sisters' mission statement says: "Sisters

crossroads is one of the key organizers of the Right to Sleep Campaign (RSC). In June 2004, RSC demonstrated by camping along the Portland Rose Festival Grand Floral Parade route.



Sisters Of The Road originally operated as a worker's cooperative, in which anyone who contributed labor was eligible to participate in decision making. In 1985 it was reorganized to be governed by a board of directors whose membership represented both the neighborhood and the wider community.

In the past the café was open on Saturdays serving Mexican meals (*Los Sabados Mexicanos*); later this was replaced by *Los Viernes Mexicanos*, a similar outreach event on Fridays.

Of The Road exists to build authentic relationships and alleviate the hunger of isolation in an atmosphere of nonviolence and gentle personalism that nurtures the whole individual toward changes that will reach the root of his or her homelessness and poverty and end it forever."

Criticism and self-criticism

- Never forget who we are and the mistakes that we have made
- Learn from individual mistakes
- There are many "right" ways to do things.

Genny Nelson says, there's nothing that we do in the café that doesn't have some kind of mechanism in place that asks: "Did we make this change because of information and feelings from our community? Can you take what your community is saying to you, the criticism, and not personalize it? Can you take criticism in the context of how it's being given: people trust that you listen to them, they know that you open something that made sense for them and change their daily life. We train to this day about our early organizing, so folks will know where our roots come from."

Diversity and cultural relevance

- Families are self-defined
- Customers can bring their "bags" into the café
- Diversity
- We should be able to see ourselves reflected in the café.

something really, really fragile. I said hello and introduced myself and she introduced herself back and I said: "What would you like?" We had chili over rice in those days and that was what she ordered up. Then 15 minutes later this man walked in the door, walked right up to her and with his demeanour suggested: "You're mine. I have the power here, we need to go." I realized in that second that I needed to intervene and I did. I went up to the two of them, I introduced myself to him and I said, "You know, you're really welcome to be here, but this woman just sat down and she's eating her meal and she gets to do that in peace, so I'm going to ask you to find another place in the café to sit down and you can order up whatever you like." He ordered up a cup of coffee, probably took two gulps and left. I knew he was disgusted, but he left and he didn't demand or drag her off the premises.

In talking to that woman afterwards, my sense was that she never had anyone stand up for her before. That was the gentle personalism in action. After that, the word went out in two distinct ways: One, what I came to understand is this woman was prostituting and her word went out to all of the women on the street that Sisters is a place where you will be respected and not judged. Then obviously what became clear in that picture, was that the man who had come in after her was her pimp. His word was: "business as usual stops at the door there." It's not a place that you can expect to go in and handle your woman, so to speak. Information walks and talks on the street really quickly in our neighborhood.

If Sisters is anything, it's an example of prax-



Some of the favorite things I had at the café:

- Vegetarian spaghetti (usually available on Thursdays)
- Rice (The cook here really knows how to do rice right; I always screw up whenever I try.)
- Tofu stir-fry with Thai peanut sauce, with rice.

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This book's title, *Quarter century of our collective humanity*, was taken from a phrase found in *DINING WITH DIGNITY*.

It took many days for me to come up with this, after several tries.

able to keep that little baby for a while, but not for long. You saw a lot of that . . .

Bert: That's amazing. Genny, today when I was talking to the college students, they were wondering how you started implementing the philosophy and if it was a struggle at first. So you want to tell the story about that?

Genny: Sandy used to say: "I brought the restaurant know-how for Sisters, Genny brought the philosophy," and that was true. By the time I helped start Sisters in 1979, I had, since 1972, been practicing nonviolence, not only as a tactic, but also as a way of life. My introduction to nonviolence happened in my senior year of high school. I had to do a term paper. I chose to do it on the Grape Boycott. The Farm Workers' Union and its leader Cesar Chavez, is where I got my first real introduction to nonviolence.

Two years later when I started working on the street I was introduced to the Catholic Worker Movement and that changed my life forever. I spent five years living in houses of hospitality practicing nonviolence and gentle personalism on a daily basis. It was very challenging at Sisters initially, because there was no other organization on the street that offered their services from a philosophy of nonviolence and gentle personalism. When people walked through our door, they knew something different was going on. It wasn't the street as usual inside our non-profit café.

One day not long after we started, I was on [my shift] by myself and a woman came in, I remember that there was something tough about her and

Mary Kay McDermott

As I looked around, I first spotted Sisters' African-American, tall, muscular, overly jovial, once-homeless, once-jailed cashier. He was taking orders patiently while making sure to check in with each customer about their current state of well-being as he always does. I remembered my first encounter with him—being a small-town country girl from Iowa, I was more than a little timid talking to a black man who had been jailed and homeless not all that long ago.

Next my eyes fell upon an elderly, mentally ill gentleman bussing the counter in front of me. Completely calm and collected, he did the job precisely as he had been taught. I recalled seeing him that morning outside the café throwing awkward punches and angry words at a person I could not see because he or she only existed inside the realms of his mental illness.

In the kitchen was where I caught my next image. There a trans woman dished up spaghetti plates for our hungry customers with an uncommon grace not usually seen in the kitchen where the staff is primarily male. With her hair in pigtails and a colorful, flowered apron she went about her work with a

'It is in this [place] that I get to make connections with real people ... There is much talk about human reactions to the reality of life on this planet.'

9

"A personalist is a go-giver, not a go-getter.

"He tries to give what he has, and does not try to get what the other fellow has. "He tries to be good to the other fellow.

"He is altro-centered not self-centered.

"He has a social doctrine of the common good through words and deeds.

"He speaks through deeds as well as words, for he knows that deeds speak louder than words.

"Through words and deeds, he brings into existence a common unity, the common unity of a community."

—Peter Maurin.



Sisters Of The Road is recognized as a place that welcomes differences and diversity while encouraging understanding and compassion. It rejects violence of all forms—physical, emotional, mental and ideological—yet at the same time its doors are never completely closed to anyone. This is based on the idea that one's behavior, rather than one's personality, should be addressed in resolving conflicts.

Maurin's personalist philosophy places responsibility for caring for others (and standing up for each other's freedoms) on individuals, rather than the impersonal and bureaucratic state.

smile on her face and a hum on her lips.

That is when I heard a peculiar sound coming from the front of the café. I turned my attention in that direction only to catch sight of an obviously intoxicated clown creating balloon creatures for the customers he was waiting in line with.

I had to shake my head, chuckle a little, and stop to think about where I work, where people find refuge from the insane streets and the even more wicked world.

The cashier, mentally ill man, trans woman, and drunken clown may not have a place in the real world, but at Sisters Of The Road, they are welcomed. Not only are they welcomed, but their presence is accepted and appreciated.

*'We should be able to
see ourselves reflected
in the café.'*

hobo jungle who were raising these kids. That would never happen today.

We saw a lot of pregnant women in those early years, we almost had a baby born on the floor in Sisters. There was a little baby whose birth mother was a very regular customer here, and Sisters is where she felt the safest to negotiate the paperwork to give her little girl up for adoption. She asked me to be a part of that [process]. It was really a poignant story about a mother's courage.

You know we always said that Sisters would be a safe public place for everyone, especially women and children. This woman knew and felt that in Sisters Of The Road Café. She was living in the jungle with her partner. When this baby was born, Children's Services Division intervened immediately. Everything in her heart and soul cried out to be a nurturing mother to this child. She knew though, because of the issues she was dealing with (not only poverty), that she wasn't going to be able to do that. So she talked to me many times, and then finally said: "I'm willing to sign the papers but they have to come here, Genny." That was fairly unheard of at the time. Most people who were clients of any services had to go to the place where the services were being offered. We were able to convince the worker to come to Sisters and a really wonderful woman did that. And that's where that paperwork happened.

The woman who almost had her baby in Sisters actually was able to bring that baby home and put her in a little drawer, a little drawer made into a baby bed from the dresser in her hotel room. She was



Give your friend a Sisters' meal coupon (gift certificate)!

You can purchase it online for \$2 each (plus applicable postage) at www.sistersoftheroad.org.

Sustaining members donate \$10 or more each month to Sisters by automatic withdrawals from their bank accounts.



Volunteers are invaluable in the operation of the café. They help serve meals, raise critical funds and steer the organization into the future.

Volunteers are also an essential part of implementing our purpose of building relationship.

Volunteer trainings are scheduled the second Wednesday of each month from 5 to 7 p.m.

would have been missing from Sisters. It was very humbling to be in those situations, alongside the folks that we knew, members of this community. So it was their invitation to find out what it was like to meet nutritional needs at skidrow that really was an important piece of understanding what they really wanted. They were asking that they not have to pray for their meal. That was a personal, spiritual piece and they wanted that to be honored. They wanted to be able to have food that was recognizable on the plate and they didn't have to worry that maybe they would get sick after eating it. They wanted a place where they weren't rushed along.

So many of the missions and soup lines were very institutionalized. Folks couldn't talk to one another, and breaking bread with your friends and family is a whole act of building relationship, strengthening the feelings between you, and finding out those new things about what's happening to each other. That kind of magic occurs over a meal. I was really humbled, as was Sandy. We knew we were going to offer an alternative.

Bert: And what about safety? I can't imagine a woman with kids, especially, would feel particularly safe.

Genny: Yeah. It was really tough. In the early days of Sisters there were a number of young boys, I'm going to say from 12 on up, who grew up on the street, always accompanied by an adult in the café. Over time it became really clear that it was the men and women who were living in the

Spanish rice recipe

3 quarts (2.8 L) white rice 6 quarts (5.7 L) water
 3 cups chopped bell peppers 0.25 #10 can diced tomatoes
 3 cups chopped celery 3 cups chopped onion
 0.5 cup butter 3 tbsp garlic powder 1tbsp black pepper
 2 tbsp cumin 2 tbsp chili powder

1. Melt butter in 4-in (10 cm) pan over low heat.
2. Add rice to brown for one minute. Stir often.
3. After one minute add 6 quarts of water. Stir.
4. Add celery, onions and bell peppers. Simmer 2 minutes.
5. Add tomatoes and spices. Stir, then cover the pan.
6. Stir occasionally until all water is evaporated.
7. Serve with 2 spoonsful of salsa.

Black beans recipe

(Sort and soak 10 quarts or 9.5 L of black beans overnight. There should be 8 gallons or 30 L of water. Next morning, put black beans on stove in a large pot. Water should be 2.5 inches or 6.4 cm above the beans.)

15 tbsp garlic 5 quarts (4.7L) chopped onions
 10 bay leaves 10 tbsp parsley 7 tbsp basil
 4 tbsp cumin 2 cups oil 5 quarts carrots
 8 quarts (7.6L) celery 0.5 tbsp cayenne 2 cups lemon juice

When beans are partially cooked, add bay leaves. Put in double boiler when beans are soft. Saute onions and celery in oil with garlic, cumin and basil, then add to beans. Add cayenne, parsley, lemon juice and 1tbsp salt to beans.

White rice recipe

(Sisters Of The Road knows how to cook rice!)
 To make 3 quarts (2.8 L) of rice:
 1 quart (950 mL) rice, 1 tsp salt and 2 quarts (1.9 L) of water.
 Cook in batches no larger than four quarts of rice. Add rice and salt to boiling water; add one tsp oil for each pound (454 g) of rice to prevent foaming. Leave lid off pot until rice comes to a boil. When rice comes to a boil, turn heat down to low and cover with a tight-fitting lid. Cook on low heat for 20 to 25 minutes, then remove from heat and let it stand covered for five to 10 minutes. (In oven: In a baking pan, place three quarts of rice, salt and six quarts of water, cover, then bake at 350°F (176°C) for 25 minutes. Remove from oven and let it stand for five minutes.)



The origin of Spanish rice is unclear; however the Spaniards are among the first people in Europe to eat rice, which was introduced to them during the Middle Ages by traders from the Middle East. This dish was popularized in America when the U.S. Army included a recipe for "Spanish fried rice" in its 1896 General Commissary

cookbook. (Source: Newsgroup rec.food.historic.)

At Sisters, our pinto beans are cooked fresh daily.



Chapter Two: the decades of homelessness—

1970s–2000s

Genny Nelson

In 1986, Kurt Liska, then-executive director of Sisters Of The Road Café, worked with then-U.S. senator Mark O. Hatfield to enable Sisters' customers to use their food stamps to purchase prepared meals at the café. On Oct. 28, 1986, the Homeless Eligibility Clarification Act (Public Law 99-570) became law. Pertinent federal regulations to implement its provisions were published in the Federal Register on March 11, 1987 (7 CFR 271 through 278).

Portland's Old Town/Chinatown neighborhood was once known as the Burnside District, and has a history as long and rich as the city of Portland itself.

After the city's first downtown dock was completed in 1852, the Burnside neighborhood adjacent to the Willamette River evolved to accommodate the recreational needs of seafarers.

Over the years, the area became the gathering place for loggers, sheepherders and anyone else passing through the city. At one time, this neighborhood was predominantly Asian, populated by Chinese and Japanese railroad construction workers.

The Burnside community remained a center for working men's entertainment, but also became a gathering place for the chronically down and out, and those who shunned the more conventional world of home, family and work. Concurrently it became the site of soup kitchens, missions, casual labor offices and social service agencies.

1970s:

In 1972, the Old Town/Chinatown neighborhood was affectionately called "The Avenue," "The Burnside Community" or the "Burnside Neighborhood." Two thousand people, mostly men, lived here. The cost of living was not greater than a veteran's pension or a social security check. You could get a room in an old hotel for \$1.25 a night, or no more than \$40 a month. This affordable hous-

women, and children for that matter, coming into this skidrow neighborhood. Boxcar Bertha's was funded by The Comprehensive Employment Training Act (CETA). These were federal dollars utilized for some very creative projects across the country. We were one of those, but they were short-lived dollars that resulted in Boxcar Bertha's closing. Sandy and I needed to literally take a look at what we had learned from the women who had come in and what we already knew about the neighborhood and make a decision about where we go from here.

What we decided was that we clearly would take a community organizing approach. This is 1979 and I started my work in the neighborhood in 1972 and Sandy had been doing work at what was then called Burnside Projects, I think for five years at that point. We both had some history and background in this community, and we both knew enough about the way social service agencies and missions operated in skidrow. We wanted to ask the folks who were residents here what they truly wanted. So, we did that. I was still working part-time in the Everett Street Service Center, which was an all-night shelter for men and women, and I would utilize those hours talking to folks about their issues.

We wanted to create something that the people who lived here really felt was necessary and would actually change their life. So people told us over and over again, create an alternative to the missions and soup lines, and they encouraged us over and over again to try the missions and soup lines out, which we did. I think had we not done that, something



116 Chapter Three: an interview with Genny Nelson

ical and mental health care are: mental illness itself, and affordable health care. 8. Barriers to wholeness include: self-limiting beliefs, and homeless provider-client interactions, i.e., services are provided in a way that degrade and disrespect the dignity of the person experiencing homelessness.

(source: **cross-roads** people's organization)

Mary Kay McDermott, Mark Maxcy, Bert Seierstad

Mark Maxcy: So, my first question is, why did you feel compelled to make Sisters a reality?

Bert Seierstad: Take yourself back 25 years.

Mark: This is your life.

Genny Nelson: Well, both Sandy [Gooch] and I had been working with a project called Boxcar Bertha's, an information referral and advocacy center for women who were on the street at the time. Now, remember this is 1979 and the missions don't offer their services to women because they didn't think women belong on skid row. There's one shelter that gives women access in the evening and there are about nine to 10 pallets in a separate area from the men. And that was about it. So, finding a safe public place as a woman on the street was really challenging. Also remember that just nine years earlier in 1970, the city of Portland got its first domestic violence shelter. And that was typical of the whole nation actually. It was the 1970s that brought us to a point as a society where we began to say, "Hitting women in their homes is not OK, and it's not something that should be hidden, not talked about, or ignored and that those women deserve to have a safe place to go."

We also had been participating in a group called Women on Burnside. There were way too many

ing was available to tenants who were addicted and actively using, and those who weren't. Case management was not a requirement for a room. There were at least half a dozen cheap eateries in addition to the missions and soup lines. A person with limited income could exercise choice in where they wanted to live, and what they wanted to eat, meagre as that may have been.

All those residents who called the "Avenue" home knew that Burnside, the neighborhood's southern boundary, was a line of demarcation. Everything to the north of it was skidrow, and almost everyone to the south of it was uncaring and, worse, afraid of them.

1980s:

By the beginning of the 1980s, the Burnside neighborhood had lost low-income hotels to urban gentrification. The writing had been on the wall for years, many elderly pensioners, men who had done manual labor all of their lives and had never shirked from responsibility, knew they were being forced out of the only homes they could afford to make way for fancy boutiques and upscale restaurants.

Minimum wage was no longer keeping up with the cost of living. Rent skyrocketed. The number of people living on the street increased. As a society we officially coined them 'the homeless.' In the mid-80s men and women dealing with the calamities of poverty and homelessness began to exclaim in Sisters Of The Road Café and other community gathering spots: "We are treated like cattle, we are not even considered human by housed people." A little girl I worked with in the West Women's and Children's Shelter told me: "Genny, when you go out and talk to people about us, tell them to not call me a 'homeless'; tell them to please call me by my name." I realized then, as a society, we would

reap a whirlwind in these children's adulthood if we failed



In 2003, Sisters Of The Road set a Guinness world record in organizing the world's biggest guitar band. Over 500 guitarists filled the Pioneer Courthouse Square and performed Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land."

Woodrow Wilson (Woody Guthrie (1912-1967) wrote the song in 1940 as a response to Irving Berlin's "God Bless America." (Source: Wikipedia.org)

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crossroads

people's organization has identified these barriers to eradicating the institution of homelessness:

1. Access to services is limited due to: red tape and hoops; scarce resources within organizations; decentralized services; and decline in public assistance.
2. Barriers to employment are: low wages; lack of jobs; previous incarceration; the economic system; and insufficient education.
3. Barriers to accessing housing include: lack of affordable housing units (0-30 percent Median Family Income [MFI]); cost of hous-

to pay attention to them now.

1990s:

In the 1990s the number of men, women and children who were homeless on any given day was increasing ever still. Although this decade represents a massive accumulation of wealth for many, the economic

'At Sisters, it isn't necessary to be hateful, because it is so easy to be loving. It isn't necessary to prove yourself, because each person who enters is met with a smile, a first-name greeting and an invitation to eat.'

large a problem to solve when no silver bullet could be found. We wanted it to simply go away, and when it didn't we pretended it did not exist. In the 90s, people dealing with homelessness became invisible.

By the end of this decade, a transformative discussion among homeless people began to take place. They were telling themselves and anyone else who would listen that they did not feel ashamed because they were poor. In fact they began to have a keener sense of capitalism. They realized their country's economic system needed them to thrive.

status of homeless people did not improve. The barriers preventing them from being able to successfully compete for jobs included a lack of computer skills, no address, no place to shower and wash clothes, a résumé with whole years missing from the job market, past incarceration, sleep deprivation and the loss of front teeth to name a few. For us as a society, homelessness fell from grace. It became too

2000s:

In this decade, the State of Oregon has faced one of its more dire economic downturns. What this has meant for homeless people is the loss of medical benefits, including life-saving prescriptions, and housing. This prioritized budgeting has made them expendable: likely to be or meant to be sacrificed or be destroyed.

'The café's staff and board embrace the notion that a society can change when people begin to make changes in their daily life.'

Carnitas à la Casera recipe

25 USDA cans of pork or beef (or equivalent TVP)
 10 chopped onions 12 tbsp garlic powder
 7 tbsp oregano 12 tbsp cumin
 2 cans green chiles 60 corn tortillas

1. Preheat oven to 425°F (220°C)
2. Rinse meat in cold running water to remove fat (or soak TVP in boiling water, let it stand until all water is absorbed).
3. Chop meat to small pieces.
4. In large mixing bowl, thoroughly combine meat, onion, spices and green chiles.
5. Place the mixture evenly in 4-inch (10 cm) pans. Cover with foil.
6. Cook in oven until done, about 30 to 35 minutes. The mixture will be done when it reaches a temperature of 155°F (68°C).
7. Serve with two corn tortillas.

Note: When fresh cilantro is available, add it chopped to the mixture before cooking.

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ing/rentals; and previous incarceration.

4. Barriers caused by prejudice and fear are: biases and stereotypes; ignorance about homelessness (by the public, police, city workers, etc.); and criminalization of homeless people.

5. Barriers caused by lack of prioritization of issues causing homelessness: lack of political will to end homelessness.

6. Barriers related to personal history include: addictive disorders; domestic violence; family background issues; and lack of skills and capabilities.

7. Barriers to accessing phys-